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SUBJECT: MEPI UPDATE FOR TUNISIA

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Summary

¶1. (SBU) Tunisia remains a difficult environment for MEPI programs and activities, particularly in the area of political reform, and some organizations remain reticent about receiving MEPI, or USG, funding. We have continued, however, to look for new ways to reach out to the community and actively seek out any openings for reform-oriented projects, including by hosting a MEPI alumni reception early this year. Embassy efforts appear to have paid off; the number of local grant proposals has doubled this year. In addition to the three ongoing local grant projects awarded to the Peregrine Leadership Institute, University of Wyoming and DEFI SARL, MEPI has also sponsored workshops organized by the Commercial Law Development Program (CLDP) and the United States Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO). DEFI SARL's high-profile and its publications' wide reach to the Tunisian community has helped give MEPI high-visibility and may have played a role in increasing the number of local grant proposals we continue to receive. End Summary.

DEFI SARL Provokes Discussion, Provides Publicity

¶2. (SBU) A local grant awarded to Tunisian publication company, DEFI SARL, funded a series of four roundtable discussions on the following topics: "United States - Tunisia Free Trade: Stakes and Perspectives" (reftel), "The Role of the Media in the Battle Against Extremism," "Arab World - United States: Divergences and/or Convergences" and "The Role of Civil Society in Good Governance." The roundtables drew a wide-range of participants, including Tunisian ministers and officials, academics, business people, journalists and civil society leaders. US Ambassador participated in two of the roundtables also giving us an opportunity to spread US message. In many countries, debates such as these might be commonplace, but the events provided a welcome forum for discussion on topics that are rarely addressed in Tunisia's public sphere. Of critical importance in increasing the impact of these discussions, all four were reproduced in their entirety as inserts in Arabic and French in As Sabah and Le Temps, the daily newspapers of Tunisia's Dar Assabah publishing house, or in DEFI SARL's new weekly magazine L'Expression. DEFI SARL's project provided much needed publicity for MEPI. Although DEFI SARL received criticism from several Tunisian publications for working with MEPI,

perhaps there is no such thing as bad press. DEFI SARL's high-profile and its publications' wide reach in the Tunisian community helped give MEPI high-visibility this year, and likely played a role in increasing the number of local grant proposals we subsequently received. DEFI SARL has submitted a proposal for a new series of roundtables. The Embassy MEPI committee is in discussions with DEFI SARL to explore ways to increase the potential impact of a new project.

Reception Brings Alumni Together

13. (U) On January 17, the Ambassador hosted a successful reception attended by 40 participants of various MEPI programs. These MEPI alumni included journalists, NGO leaders, entrepreneurs and students. The reception provided an opportunity for embassy employees to interact with the alumni and a chance for them to network with each other. Feedback from attendees was positive, with requests to hold such alumni receptions annually. Many of them were particularly energized by the opportunity to be able to talk in person to the Ambassador about their experiences in the United States and their current projects. We plan to make these alumni receptions an annual tradition.

CLDP Contributes to Transformational Diplomacy

14. (U) On January 30 - February 1, CLDP, in conjunction with the African Development Bank, hosted a MEPI-funded seminar in Tunis on the theme: "Administrative Judges and Government

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Procurement." The aim of the seminar was not only to provide technical assistance that will contribute to good governance, administrative transparency and fair competition, but also to promote the regional harmonization of laws and practice. The seminar, a follow-up to a 2006 workshop on "Dispute Resolution in Government Procurement," brought together administrative judges, legal experts and procurement officials from Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania and Tunisia. Participant feedback on this program was extremely positive, as well as on CLDP activities more generally. During his opening remarks, one Tunisian judge paid homage to a MEPI-funded series of consultations in the United States for the Center for Judicial and Legal Studies (CEJJ). He stated that the 2005 trip played a seminal role in the thought process and the subsequent consensus building that resulted in a recent law on entrepreneurship in Tunisia. The December 2007 law represents a radical departure for economic regulation in Tunisia, moving towards a negative list approach and away from a positive list approach, where any economic activity not expressly authorized was forbidden.

USPTO Promotes Copyright Enforcement

15. (U) On March 24 - 25, USPTO, working with the Tunisian Organization for the Protection of Author's Rights (OTPA) and the CEJJ, organized a MEPI-funded workshop on copyright enforcement for a group of 50 Tunisian lawyers, judges and customs officials. The workshop featured presentations by USPTO officials, Tunisian experts on intellectual property rights, and representatives from the private sector. The event received positive press coverage in French and Arabic dailies and also led to a two-page article on IPR protection in French weekly magazine L'Expression. This workshop is part of the Embassy's broader efforts to stress the importance of strong intellectual property rights (IPR) protection to Tunisian companies, artists and consumers. The Embassy's MEPI committee is in the final stages of awarding a local grant to a Tunisian NGO to develop a public awareness campaign on IPR. Over the past three years, 33 Tunisians

have participated in USPTO workshops in the United States.

Peregrine Leadership Institute Local Grant

¶16. (SBU) A local grant awarded to the Peregrine Leadership Institute is promoting education and mutual awareness of leadership principles, as well as effective governance and business management, through the exchange of students and teachers. Thus far, instructors from the Peregrine Leadership Institute have visited Tunisia to promote democratic leadership concepts and principles with senior leaders in Tunisian government and business. However, the Institute has been granted 6-month extension to implement the final phase of the project. A December 2007 lecture by Peregrine's President and Vice President scheduled at the National School of Administration (Ecole Nationale d'Administration - ENA) was cancelled at the last minute after the group was already in Tunisia. While Peregrine was able to arrange events with the Tunisian Banking Association and the Tunisian-American Chamber of Commerce (TACC), the ENA cancellation reflects the complexity of programming events in Tunisia generally and with GOT entities, in particular. MEPI is currently working with Peregrine to ensure that the planned exchange of Tunisian students to the Peregrine Institute takes place before the project is closed.

University Of Wyoming Local Grant

¶17. (SBU) The aim of the University of Wyoming project is to enhance private sector and democratic practices in Tunisia. Due to the departure of the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) official in place during the project's inception, UW has been unable to complete a planned visit by an American scholar to teach a short course in English, focused upon research and curriculum writing. Following a September 2007 trip to the University of Sfax, the University of Wyoming and the Arabic Department at the University of Sfax drafted a document detailing future curriculum

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collaboration. Through the grant, UW participated in the language village of Nabeul - the GOT's immersion camp for university English students and a major GOT priority. As an outgrowth of the relationships built through this project, a delegation of Wyoming state legislators will be visiting Tunisia in 2008. MEPI continues to push for more interactions between students from both countries and an enhancement of the English language curriculum in Tunisia with the aim of enhancing and supporting the investment climate, entrepreneurial spirit and employment atmosphere of Tunisia.

Comment: MEPI Moves from Four-Letter Word to Known Commodity

¶18. (SBU) Tunisia remains a difficult environment for MEPI more broadly and for democratic reform, in particular. Some Tunisian organizations remain extremely reticent to receive MEPI, or any USG, funding. Articles continue to appear in the Tunisian press accusing opposition leaders and organizations of receiving MEPI funding, referring to MEPI as if it were an obscene word. And yet, there are signs that despite the name-bashing, MEPI is becoming a known, and desired, commodity. This year we have already received twice as many local grant proposals as the year before. While it is difficult to point to one factor in particular, MEPI received a lot of press -- positive and negative -- this year through Embassy outreach and high-visibility grantees. Although projects directly and exclusively targeting political reform remain a

rarity, we continue to look for openings where we find them
and hope we can help Tunisian civil society to push the
boundaries, however incrementally. End Comment.
GODEC